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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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THE USSR AND LEBANON

Summary

The Soviets will try to exploit tensions or even limited hostilities in Lebanon to improve the USSR's position in the Middle East, particularly with the Syrians and Palestinians. But they have also opposed a major Syrian-Israeli clash which could lead to a US-Soviet confrontation. The contradictions involved in pursuing such a course means Soviet policy is not always clearly defined and can lead to miscalculation. []

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In the event of hostilities, the level of Soviet military support to Syria would depend on the scope and scale of the fighting. The USSR has indicated to Syria that it would provide only limited military support--such as arms resupply--if the fighting was confined to Lebanon. If the Israelis made substantial attacks into Syria, however, we believe Moscow could place some of its airborne units on alert, step up weapons deliveries, or possibly send Soviet SAM crews or fighter pilots to Syria. Moscow would be more likely to introduce airborne or ground troops in the event of a full-scale war that threatened the fall of Damascus or the destruction of the Syrian military. []

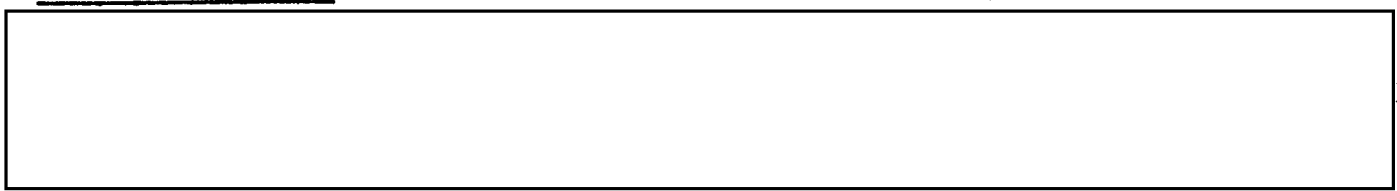
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Soviet policy toward Lebanon is determined by the impact of developments there on the USSR's broader position in the Middle

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East, particularly its ties to Syria and the Palestinians. The Soviets especially want to strengthen their close ties with Syria and to reinforce the USSR's image as a protector of Palestinian rights. The Soviets would also like to have a role in any settlement that might be arranged. Tensions--or even limited hostilities--in Lebanon enable the USSR to increase Syrian and Palestinian dependence on Soviet support while portraying the US as the sole supporter of Israeli intransigence. []

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Ties and Influence with Syria and the PLO

One aspect of the USSR's close relationship with Syria--since conclusion of the friendship treaty in October 1980--has been stronger Soviet support of Syrian policy in Lebanon. In the past, Lebanon had often been an irritant in Soviet-Syrian relations and Moscow's opposition to Syria's intervention in Lebanon in 1976 had severely strained bilateral ties. The USSR's objection reflected its interests in keeping the Palestinians in Lebanon free from Syrian political domination and susceptible to Soviet influence. While this concern probably continues to color Soviet attitudes toward Syria's presence there, Syria's enhanced importance to the USSR is pushing the Soviets to lend more support to Damascus. During last year's missile crisis in Lebanon, for example, the Soviets, for the first time, characterized the Syrian presence in Lebanon as legitimate. The Soviets may calculate that Syrian President Assad's increasing dependence on Soviet support will lead Syria to pursue policies in Lebanon that are more compatible with Soviet interests. []

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The Soviets also have important equities with the Palestinians and have consistently supported their presence in Lebanon. They think that close ties with the Palestinians help enhance the USSR's image as a supporter of the Arabs and pressure other Arabs to oppose US diplomacy that ignores the PLO and excludes the USSR. Moscow's decision to upgrade the PLO office in Moscow last October was aimed at underscoring Soviet support to the Palestinian cause. The USSR is providing more and better arms to the Palestinians. [] the two sides recently finalized an arms deal that includes SA-9 surface-to-air missiles--a missile the Soviets have not previously delivered--and anti-aircraft weapons. []

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Leverage on Syria and the PLO

Moscow's ability to influence events in Lebanon is constrained by the need to protect its relationship with Syria. The Soviets have only limited leverage on Damascus' actions in Lebanon without damaging their close ties to Assad. He has long kept the Soviets at arms length regarding Lebanon because he considers Syrian interests there vital and separate from the Soviet-Syrian relationship. []

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The divisions within the PLO offer the USSR the opportunity to play one Palestinian faction off against the other, thereby

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25X1 enhancing Moscow's leverage over the PLO. The Soviets have long been suspicious of Fatah leader Arafat and have occasionally sought to strengthen the more radical Palestinian groups to restrict Arafat's policy options. Moscow especially wants to ensure that Arafat remains opposed to any Arab-Israeli settlement process that excludes the USSR. Soviet influence with the PLO, however, is diluted by the ability of Syria and Libya to serve as alternative arms suppliers to the PLO and by Fatah's intense suspicions of the USSR. []

Attitude Toward Tensions and Hostilities

25X1 The Soviets are not opposed to tensions per se in Lebanon as long as they remain at a manageable level and do not escalate into a crisis serious enough to draw them into a confrontation with Israel or the US. Indeed, insofar as chronic instability in Lebanon reinforces Palestinian and Syrian dependence on Moscow's good will and military support, the Soviets favor and encourage it. They probably hope that the tensions in Lebanon will unite the Arabs behind Syria and the USSR while isolating the US with Israel. They also may anticipate that such tensions will put more pressure on Egyptian President Mubarak to distance himself both from Israel and the US. Moscow would also use the problems in Lebanon to seek a broader role in Middle Eastern diplomacy. They already cite the situation in Lebanon as evidence of the need to replace the US-sponsored Camp David process with an international approach in which the USSR would have a role equal to that of the US. []

25X1 At the same time, the Soviets remain concerned that any crisis in Lebanon might escalate into a broad Israeli-Syrian conflict. They have a keen appreciation of Syria's military shortcomings and realize such a conflict might lead to a Soviet-US confrontation if the USSR tries to prevent a Syrian defeat. From Moscow's view, other possible negative ramifications of a large war include Assad's possible fall from power, the establishment of an Israeli-dominated Christian state, and the possible ouster of the PLO from Lebanon. These concerns have led the Soviets to caution the Syrians about undertaking any major hostilities in southern Lebanon. During the Syrian-Israeli face-off in Lebanon last year, for example, the Soviets gave Syria full political and diplomatic support but indicated Soviet military support would be limited in the event of a conflict in Lebanon. The Soviets have continued to assure Damascus of the USSR's support in the event of an Israeli attack on Syria but have also cautioned the Syrians against escalating the Lebanese conflict. []

Soviet Military Responses to Hostilities in Lebanon

25X1 An Israeli attack on Syria's SAM sites in Lebanon or a large-scale ground incursion into Lebanon would probably prompt the Soviets to resupply the Syrian military and position ships from the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron off Syria's coast. These

actions would be intended to demonstrate to Assad and other Arab states the value of close ties and alliance with the USSR. The Soviets also would seek to deter further Israeli military action and to position the USSR to take credit for halting Israeli aggression. []

Moscow's immediate response would likely be to caution Israel and influence the US to restrain Tel Aviv. The Soviets would hope that Assad's unwillingness to take on Israel in a major war and US pressures on Tel Aviv to avoid a major conflict would limit the fighting while offering the USSR the opportunity to project itself as Syria's protector, enhance its position with other Arab states, and gain a major role in the settlement of the crisis. []

An expansion of hostilities to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights would present the Soviets with a major decision, especially if Assad's intention was to escalate the fighting with the aim of obtaining direct Soviet and US involvement. The Soviets would want to avoid leaving Assad in the breach. But they might simply decide to refrain from any immediate military moves that could embroil the USSR in the hostilities in hopes the conflict would be short-lived and a compromise reached that would enable Damascus to claim a victory. More protracted fighting would lead the Soviets to step up the resupply effort, provide more sophisticated arms, and step up the USSR's naval activity off Syria's coast. []

If the Israelis carried their attacks into Syria the Soviets would consider further military actions designed to deter Israel and induce Washington to pressure Israel to desist. These could include placing some Soviet airborne units on alert, providing more sophisticated arms to Syria, or introducing Soviet SAM crews and fighter pilots into Syria. []

The Soviets would be more likely to introduce their own airborne or ground units in the event of a full-scale war between Israel and Syria in which Israel sought either to take Damascus or destroy the Syrian military. The evidence available indicates the Soviets have promised the Syrians in general terms that the USSR would take military action in the event of a major Israeli attack. Furthermore, a significant Syrian defeat or Damascus' acceptance of clearly unpalatable conditions at Israeli's hands would adversely affect Moscow's standing with the Arab states. The value of an alliance with the USSR would be weakened and Arab confidence in Soviet political and military support undermined. []

SUBJECT: The USSR and Lebanon

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